

Chinese getting feet wet at WKU Educators from overseas spending weeks in U.S. to get new teaching ideas

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During her first meal in the United States, Haiyan "Grace" Yu couldn't decide which "seasoning" to put on her salad.

So she chose what seemed the safest course: She poured on every flavor of dressing lined up in the restaurant at Western Kentucky University's Downing University Center.

Yu is one of five Chinese university officials participating in an interdisciplinary scholars program at Western Kentucky University. And while she has already learned a lot from observing the educational system at the campus, the professor said she wasn't all that impressed with her first food selection.

"I don't know what ingredients I put in it," Yu said, laughing about her salad. "I tried my best to like it, but I couldn't eat it."

Yu is joined by three other English professors and a dean from Liaoning University in observing a spectrum of classes at Western, varying from English literature to business management.

The five arrived on Sept. 15 and will spend a total of eight weeks studying American methods of academic instruction and student-teacher interaction.

Wil Clause, executive director of the Mattie Newman Ford Professor of Entrepreneurship, said Western's Center of Entrepreneurship and Innovation is collaborating with Liaoning University to develop relationships between the universities' professionals to look at academic and cultural issues using problem-based learning methods.

"Overall, this is an attempt to bridge the oceans, the United States and the education programs with these Chinese programs," Clause said.

The \$37,000 program, financed by Liaoning University, is designed to lay the groundwork for future professor and student exchanges between the two schools.

The foreign officials have all adopted English names and have spent the past two weeks filling their days with observations of and submersion in American culture. To that end, they've been to a Western football game and a concert on the campus lawn.

Zhongcen "Johnathan" Xu, a dean at the Chinese university, said learning how to eat with a fork and knife was one of the biggest challenges he's been faced with since coming to the United States.

Xu said seeing culture with his own eyes has given depth to what he's read and studied in text books.

"We really want to feel a real culture and real economy," Xu said, adding that it is all the visitors' first time out of China. "...we are given the chance to listen to teachers, but that is not enough, we need to take take part in more campus activities" to feel the culture.

The officials will present their observations of the American education system prior to the end of their stay in November. But already they said they have seen many differences.

"I think the classes are very active with teachers and students involved in discussions," Xu said. "The students can have more freedom to express ideas and what they really want to know, the teacher will give them methods to find the correct answer."

Lijun "Carol" Guan, an English professor at the school in Shenyang, said she was "deeply impressed" by Western's use of several professors "co-teaching" a class by bringing in aspects from each of their disciplines.

"I will take back with me the idea of co-teaching and methods some of the (professors) use to make students participate actively," she said. "The teachers prepare some questions for students to take the point in and then give them credit for participating."

Xin "Linda" Li said she teaches her English classes straight from a textbook, unit by unit, and was surprised when she saw some classes where students didn't appear to have textbooks at all.

"I'm finding students in the U.S. are very active and eager to express ideas," she said. "Chinese students may be shyer, but I will try my best to encourage students to express ideas. We are teaching English and its main use is to communicate. So to encourage them to express their ideas is more important."

Finding that American teaching is more student-centered rather than teacher-centered impressed Yulin "Grace" Song. The English professor also noted the flexibility of American education.

"American students are emotionally involved," she said. "There is no correct or wrong answer... (they) create an answer using critical thinking, and that is the most important part of teaching."

Clouse said the schools will develop problem-based questions that involve global issues for students from both ends of the globe to discuss through the Internet.

All of the visitors said they have enjoyed the hospitality they have incurred during their stay, and hope to take any ideas back to their own classrooms.

"I really think my experience will benefit myself, my students and our college," Yu said.